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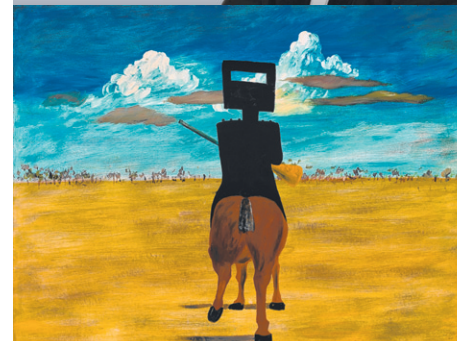
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FLYING INTO A STORM

Jane Cornwell talks Spain, sex and politics with Pedro Almodovar, who pushes new boundaries with his latest work

HAVING watched Pedro Almodovar's screwball plane-set comedy *I'm So Excited!* the day before I fly from London to Madrid to meet him, I'm anxious. Will the landing gear jam, as it does in the film, forcing us to circle aimlessly in the air? Have the drinks in economy been spiked with a sedative? Is there an orgy going on in business class?

Will three male flight attendants burst out from behind a curtain to lip-sync and do jazz hands to the dance-pop classic the movie is named after? That part I'm rather hoping for. "These people think their lives are about to end," the Oscar-winning Spanish director, 63, will tell me later. "So this is their way of combating uncertainty. Of being free."

The people at the front of the plane, that is. While the crew and their elite passengers — a psychic virgin, a corrupt banker, a famous actor, a mysterious Mexican, a big-time dominatrix and two newlyweds — are all drinking, confessing and having mesaline-fuelled sex, everyone in economy class is out cold.

A crash landing is imminent, but with the pilot and co-pilot unzipping in the cockpit and the attendants up and down on their knees in the loo, exactly who is in charge and where they'll end up is debatable.

I'm So Excited! has divided audiences in Britain and Europe, where it has been out for

several months. While many have welcomed the film as a filthy, fun-filled return to the Almodovar of yore, the provocateur behind subversive 1980s romps such as *Labyrinth of Passions*, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* and *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, others say he's lost the plot, if indeed the movie ever had one.

"Those who view the director as a suave master of ceremonies may look on in dismay and even disbelief," said *The New Yorker*. "Infantile," declared Carlos Boyero, of Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, a critic whose bitchy reviews of Almodovar films are legendary. "Loved it," says a Spanish airline steward I chat to in the galley. "I mean, it's Almodovar," he adds.

I'm So Excited! is certainly a radical departure from 2011's *The Skin I Live In*, a medical thriller that reunited Antonio Banderas with the director who catapulted him to stardom in 1988's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.

Both Banderas and Penelope Cruz — a one-time Almodovar muse nominated for a best actress Oscar for her role in 2006's *Volver* — make cameos as ground crew in this, Almodovar's 19th film.

The likes of Javier Camara (*Talk to Her*), Cecilia Roth (*All About My Mother*) and Lola Duenas (*Volver*) feature in an ensemble cast as talented and engaging as anything we've come to expect from the left-leaning, sunglasses-wearing, openly gay auteur.



There are newcomers, of course; the hunky Miguel Angel Silvestre is excellent as the drug-smuggling bridegroom. But for long-time fans, part of the joy of watching a new Almodovar flick is spotting familiar faces from the Almodovarian universe. As is ticking off his stylistic hallmarks: the glossy decor; the stand-alone song; the elements of melodrama and pop culture; the paean to classic film (for *I'm So Excited!* think Italian comedies starring a flustered Sophia Loren or the Marx Brothers crushed inside a telephone box). The common Almodovarian themes: identity, creativity, desire, survival. The use of metaphor to tell stories with complex

narratives and circular plotlines, stories that Almodovar has for the most part written himself. And if ever a film comes loaded with symbolism, it's *I'm So Excited!*. For behind all the mile-high sex, high-camp silliness and sharp (subtitled) wordplay is a director venting his fury on the powerbrokers of Spain — a recession-hit country where youth unemployment is more than 56 per cent, a banana costs \$2 and corruption scandals are rife.

So is it possible to enjoy the film without understanding its political subtext? "This is a question I ask myself," says Almodovar, sitting in his office at El Deseo ("Desire"), the production company he founded in 1986 with his producer brother Augustin, in a suburb 20 minutes from Madrid airport and close to Las Ventas, the famous bullring. "But I think so," he shrugs. "My films are made to entertain."

To his right, shelves heave with books and award trophies on tiny plinths. Messages ping, ignored, on a smartphone on his desk, overlooked by a large abstract oil painting with "La ley del deseo" written across it (a take on the poster for 1987's *Law of Desire*, a film about a gay love triangle and a key work in his career), and a portrait of Bette Davis in *All About Eve*.

Almodovar has never relocated to Hollywood, as he might have done after winning an Oscar for 1999's *All About My Mother* and another for 2002's *Talk to Her*. But Hollywood — old Hollywood, with its knowing panache and central female characters — is there in his movies. Just as its aesthetic is here in his office.

Colours pop all around us, from the sky-blue polo shirt he's wearing (with beige shorts and sandals) and the raspberry juice he's drinking to the brown-on-the-way-to-orange leather office chairs that we (that's me, Almodovar and an English translator named Clare) are sitting on.



SPAIN NEEDS SOMEWHERE TO LAND THE PLANE. BUT WE DON'T KNOW WHERE

PEDRO ALMODOVAR



Cecilia Roth in *I'm So Excited!*, above; and, above right, Javier Camara, Raul Arevalo and Carlos Areces as flight attendants in the film

"Feelings of fear and uncertainty are universal," he continues. "I'm sure that Australians are worrying about their economic and political future as well right now. Sadly here in Spain there's no difference between the Right and the Left [in politics] any more, so we're living with this huge weight hanging over us."

Almodovar's English is perfectly competent. It is only when his verbal exuberance gets too much that he switches into long-winded Spanish and calls on Clare, only to butt in — in English — while she's telling me what he said. From a man whose films often mix tenses and genders, it's a sort of meta-translation that feels curiously apt.

"Spain needs somewhere to land the plane," he says animatedly, in the middle of something Clare is saying. "But we don't know where, or who will be in charge, or what the dangers are." He wraps his big worker's hands around the tall glass of ice cubes that's sitting on his desk next to his juice. It's hot; a killer heatwave in Spain has made his bush of silver hair much less vertical than it looks in the wacky promotional still for *I'm So Excited!* hanging on a wall. It's too hot to open the present I've brought him — a tin of jasmine tea from upmarket British department store Fortnum & Mason — but he's appreciative, just the same. "I love tea!" he'll tell me after we've finished.

If he'd rather be in the swimming pool at his country house a few hours' drive from Madrid, or deep in one of two books he's reading (Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* and *Hopscotch* by Argentine writer Julio Cortazar), or busy with one of the two scripts he's working on ("A female drama and an eco sci-fi where the women are another species but still look like women"), he doesn't say.

Almodovar may be the most famous Spanish filmmaker since Luis Bunuel, a national mould-breaker in the vein of Dali and Picasso and the go-to director for actresses after chunky roles (Eva Mendes allegedly is the latest to join the queue) but he really does seem remarkably unaffected.

"I wanted to make a crazy comedy because the atmosphere right now is so bleak," he says of *I'm So Excited!*. "I don't know why people are so scandalised. When I think back to the films I made in the 1980s..." He fixes me with his sad brown eyes. "I mean, there isn't even any nudity! I actually think it's pretty innocent; all the sexuality is seen through the eyes of the virgin [Duenas], who is desperate to lose her virginity." Which eventually she does, via an aroused but sleeping guy in economy — which may or may not be another metaphor.

The virgin isn't the only character who's curious: the plane's married pilot ends up in flagrante delicto with one of the male flight attendants, resulting in a gag to make you gag and another taboo being bashed.

"Bisexuality," says Almodovar, "is something that hasn't been talked about very much in film. Particularly male bisexuality, which people think is a cover-up for homosexuality but is very real."

All Almodovar's films have championed freedom: sexual freedom, creative freedom, freedom of speech. It's his ongoing defence of liberty that makes him a political filmmaker, just as it's this that makes him so scandalous.

Even now, with the orgy-tastic but innocent *I'm So Excited!*. "The world has changed," he says with a sigh. "Society has changed."

Back in 1980, Spain was just emerging from the shadow of the brutal 36-year dictatorship of general Francisco Franco when Pedro Almodovar Caballero came zinging on to the cinematic landscape with his first commercial release, *Pepi, Luci, Bom*. The tale of a masochistic housewife, a lesbian punk-rock singer and a woman wanting revenge on the corrupt policeman who raped her, the film stunned the country's conservative old guard.

As did most things back then: Madrid was exploding with optimism and creativity. A countercultural movement of artists, musicians and filmmakers, later called *La Movida Madrilenia* ("the Madrilian scene") had Almodovar — with his wild black hair and outrageous ways — at its helm.

It has often been said the director's journey has paralleled that of Spain's; certainly his early films reflect a country busy reconfiguring its post-Franco identity, just as Almodovar was.

But his career also should be viewed as a reaction to and against his childhood in a rural town in the red windswept flatlands of La Mancha province, where Cervantes's Don Quixote famously tilted at windmills and the plane in *I'm So Excited!* lands in a ghost airport that was built at a cost of €1 billion (\$1.4bn) before eventually being abandoned.

"All you see now are a couple of rabbits hopping along the runway," Almodovar shakes his head in disgust. "It's another metaphor of the pure financial corruption and megalomania of our politicians. About a year ago, some minister said that there are 17 airports like this in Spain, all of them useless."

The airport in *I'm So Excited!* isn't so far from the river where Almodovar, one of four children born to an oil-and-wine merchant father and a housewife mother (and who earned pocket money writing letters for illiterate friends), remembers the women of his village washing their clothes.

"When I was maybe three or four I would dabble my finger in the foam of the water and play with the fish. It was like a Renoir picture or a scene from Fellini, since I was this little child surrounded by women." It is one of his earliest memories.

"They would spread their clothes out to dry and sing songs and tell each other all sorts of stories about affairs, and incest, and people who'd died and come back, that they supposed a little boy wouldn't understand." A smile. "I think this is the origin of the strong women in my movies."

He was eight when his family sent him to a Catholic boarding school in the west of the country, in the hope he'd become a priest. Instead he discovered the local cinema — "my real education" — and aged 17 left for Madrid to become a film director. Self-taught (since Franco had closed the National Film School), he made movies on Super-8, wrote comics and stories, sang in a parodic punk-rock group and supported himself with an administrative job at Spain's national phone company, Telefonica, where he worked for 12 years.

Pepi, Luci, Bom was made in his free time, with

the help of a team of unpaid volunteers. He doubts that the film would get a commercial release now, what with the fierce competition and the changed world.

One of the pros of being so well known, he says, is he can always find funding for his films from other European nations, since no one in Spain has any money.

Success has given him his place in the country ("I only go for the day; I don't like spending the night out there by myself"), and the big new house in Madrid he bought three years ago. He'd wanted the interior to be minimalist, he says, but what with his books, CDs, paintings and love of colour — and his cat Lucio, given to him by the crew of *The Skin I Live In* — it has turned out anything but. "I have one room that is all white, with nothing in it, where I do my yoga," he says. "My yoga teacher always asks me how I can live with all these bright colours, but I find them very calming."

He travels a lot: accepting awards, promoting his films, delivering the occasional speech. He has never been to Australia, although his interest in our country was piqued after watching the seminal 1971 film *Wake in Fright*, a classic of early modern Australian cinema, and reinforced by chats with directors including Baz Luhrmann, whom he met a few years back in New York.

He asks me how long the flight is and I tell him that he could probably get from Madrid to Sydney in 22 hours, maybe 24 tops. He stares at me, incredulous.

But you'd be in business class, I say reassuringly. You could sleep, and relax. You could even have a word with the flight attendants, get them to deliver a lip-synced dance routine before and after Bangkok.

Almodovar pauses for a beat before flashing a grin. "Now that," he says, "is a flight I would love to take."

I'm So Excited screens from September 19.

Jane Cornwell travelled to Madrid courtesy of Transmission Films.

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